

Perilous

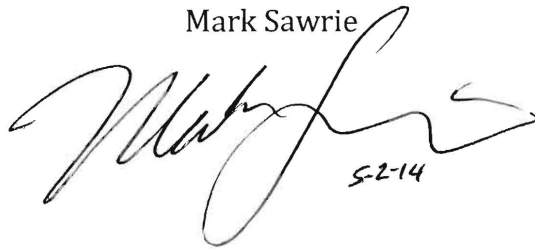
An Honors Thesis (ART 490)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Sawrie', with the date '5-2-14' written below it.

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Abstract

Perilous is a reminder of simpler times. When we were children, our imaginations roamed free. Now, adulthood overshadows the days of imaginative playing. Something that was once innocent and fun is too unpredictable: a child could get hurt if they are not protected from every risk. I photographed children in out-of-the ordinary situations, and publicly exhibited the artwork to an adult audience. Since every adult has some memory of being a child, the work juxtaposes their perspectives with the children's. I also self-promoted the exhibition, and publicly presented my artwork to an audience.

Acknowledgements

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I would like to thank Jacinda Russel for her instruction. She has helped me become a more professional artist and raised my confidence in building an art career.

I would like to thank my parents, grandparents and Josh for believing in me and reminding me that I can do anything I set my mind to.

I would like to thank the Broses, the Frosts, the Neals, the Bishers, and my parents for being willing to be a part of this project and allowing me to photograph their children.

Author's Statement

This series serves as a reminder of a simpler time. When we were children, our imaginations roamed free. Somewhere in the growing up process, the imaginative part of our mind was gradually suppressed and replaced with logic, problem solving and adult matters. We are taught cultural norms, responsibilities, and discipline. All of a sudden, our ability for the simple joy of playing has passed. While our imaginations may still exist, we eventually just don't have time for the way we lived as children.

By placing children in out-of-the ordinary situations, I juxtapose their perspectives with those of adults'. Every adult has some memory of being a child. The days of imaginative amusement are fond memories that have been overshadowed by adulthood. Playing was once innocent and fun, but now it seems too unpredictable. The perilous situations are not derived from the children's understanding. To them, they are simply enjoying the act of play and are unaware of any dangers around them. As adults, we see the risks. When we look at these situations, there is a sense of tension or foreboding. Our lived experiences, whether taught or otherwise learned, influence our perceptions of the events in each photograph.

I allow the children to interact with the space, engaging in their reality, and watching what unfolds. I only give direction when doing so would allow a better composition or would re-create a specific moment. I draw from my experiences babysitting, being the oldest sibling of four, and working as a camp counselor. My photographs, and the process of creating them, allow me to take on the perspectives of my subjects while retaining my adult outlook.

Significance

Perilous fits into the tableau style of photography: each image contains a narrative within the frame. I create each situation rather than documenting an event that is already happening. The scenes are believable as actual occurrences even

though they were staged. The viewer's life perspective determines what that story is and the meaning behind each photograph.

Most photographers who are successful working with children in the contemporary art world are already parents. Some of these include Sally Mann, Julie Blackmon, and Zack Bent. While there are a large number of artists who photograph children, I have a unique perspective to offer because I am not a parent. Instead, I have a decade's worth of knowledge in being a big sister, an older cousin, a babysitter, and a camp counselor. Through these experiences, I have been able to observe and understand how children interpret the world. Since I am not a parent, I am able to approach photographing children in a different way. Most photographers working with them are interested in childhood itself: imagination, playing, innocence, etc. While my artwork naturally brings up those aspects, they are not the sole focus of the series.

I also believe *Perilous* is a comment on American culture's current mindset. Though we might not call it perspective taking, we think that everyone is an individual and is entitled to their own opinions. We emphasize understanding and tolerance. However, I do not believe we have mastered this yet. Everyone, especially politically, have their own opinions and stick to them without regard to others' perspectives. By practicing the skill of perspective taking, people would be more understanding and empathetic toward each other. It may be difficult, but it is something humans need to do. My project subtly challenges the adult viewers to do so by thinking about their own experiences in relation to the children's viewpoints and then thinking about how they are different. Personally, *Perilous* has helped me not only to grow as an artist by developing and taking this subject matter further than I ever have before, but it also serves as a reminder that I am not exempt from practicing perspective taking.

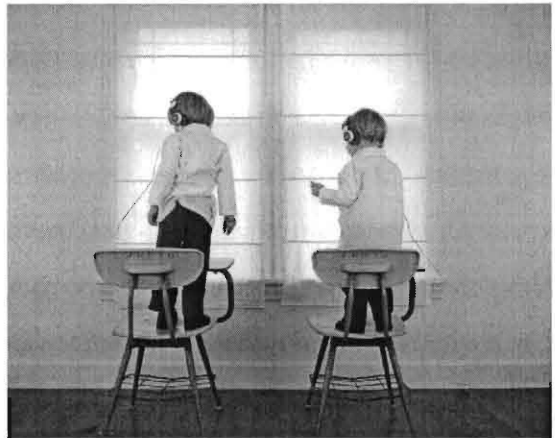
Influences

The first and most influential photographer on my artwork is Sally Mann. In a documentary that I watched during my sophomore year of college she said, "One of

the things my career as an artist might say to young artists is: The things that are close to you are the things you can photograph the best. And unless you photograph what you love, you are not going to make good art.” Since hearing that quote, I have changed my entire perspective on art making. For Sally Mann, she loved her family and made photographs about them. I also hope to, one day, balance being a photographer, mother and wife. Her honest look into the lives of her children inspired me to also make work about my experiences with the children around me.



Zack Bent has also impacted my photography work. Zack earned several degrees from Ball State in architecture, environmental design, and photography. He also created a series working with his sons. During my junior year, he came back to visit and gave an artist talk. I had the pleasure of holding a portfolio review with him to show him my early work with children. His advice to me was to continue the work I was creating with children and that the best photographs were the ones that I was not overthinking.



The tableau style of photography has influenced this body of work. As previously mentioned in the significance section, each photograph holds a narrative within the frame. One photographer in particular who works in this style that has influenced me is Frances Kearney. I drew elements from her series “Five People Thinking the Same Thing.” In this series, she does not show her



subjects' faces. Not being able to read the subjects' facial expressions creates an element of mystery and puts the task of figuring out what the subjects are thinking in the viewer's hands. I do the same with the children I photograph. Doing so helps challenge the viewer to imagine what the child may be thinking rather than allowing them to immediately read it through facial expressions.

Finally, Julie Blackmon's style has been an inspiration. She, like Sally Mann, is a mother who photographs her children. Her realities are obviously constructed, but still believable as an actual occurrence. While I currently do not have the ability to create the elaborate scenes that she does, I am able to find situations that are somewhat unrealistic, but then make them believable in my photographs.



One day, I aspire to move toward more constructed realities.

Process/Technique

The most important element of my process was finding subjects to photograph. I began by asking family and friends, and then moved on to families that I do not have as much experience with such as my boss and a professor. Most parents were willing and excited for me to photograph their children. I have only had one experience where the mother was unwilling.

Concepts for each photograph began with either brainstorming dangerous or out-of-the-ordinary situations for children to be in or scouting out such locations. If the idea for a location came first (i.e. a hay loft or an abandoned building), I went and found that location and came back to it on the day I photographed. Otherwise, I simply drove around, looking for places with some element of danger. This is how I came across locations such as the Port-a-John rental facility and the empty, snowy street. I also incorporated input from peers as to what they thought was dangerous.

Once the location was nailed down, I worked with the parents to coordinate our schedules and found a time to meet. I usually gave them a few options for locations and allowed them to pick which one was most convenient and comfortable for them. On location, I allowed the child to interact with the space, engaged in his or her reality, and watched what unfolded.

The children were mostly in control at this stage of the process. I only gave direction when doing so would allow a better composition or would re-create a specific moment. If they were unsure what to do because of the presence of my camera, I encouraged them to pretend like I was not even there and made a suggestion to get them to play. I photographed from angles that did not show their faces because my artwork is not intended to be a portrait of any specific child, but a portrait of children in general. This also created more mystery about what they were thinking.

The next step was editing. I narrowed down the images I had taken to the most interesting based on situation, composition and the action of the child. Once just a few remained, I cropped them into squares and once again requested input from peers about which photographs they found most intriguing. Finally, I edited them in Adobe Photoshop until I was satisfied with how each photograph looked and printed them at 12 inches by 12 inches on 13x19 Velvet Fine Art paper. I repeated this process for each photograph in the series.

The final photographs were matted and then framed in black stained frames that I constructed myself. I attached hanging wire to these for display in the Atrium Gallery. In the gallery, I hung ten total with five in a row directly above another row of five.

Description of Work

In *Park*, the adult viewer immediately senses that this situation is perilous. The large, dark space and the fact that she is alone both contribute to that. Also, her bright pink jacket immediately draws the viewer's attention because it is so different from the space around her. Typically, children are told not to play around

cars because cars are much bigger than them, fast, and could hurt them. Especially in a place like a dark parking garage: a car could pull into the spot she is sitting in and not even see her. The child, though, is unaware of these dangers and is content playing with her doll underneath the sole light in the space.

There is more to be discovered after taking note that she could be in danger. Questions such as, “Why is she there?” or “What is she thinking?” come to mind. The viewer can answer these questions by taking into account both the child’s perspective and their own experiences. Though they do not know who the child is, they draw from their own memories as both a child and an adult to analyze and figure out the story.



The idea for *Park* is rooted in my personal fear of the dark. When I was a child, it was my greatest fear because I thought there was always something lurking in the shadows. As an adult, I see darkness—whether it is night or just an absence of light—as an opportunity for children to be hurt or even abducted.

This location was actually not planned or pre-conceived. I was on my way to another location when I drove by this parking garage and saw the potential for a new photograph. I was with my mother, my sister, a friend, her nephew and her daughter. The girl in *Park* is my sister. I have been photographing my sister since the day she was born and she is old enough now that she loves to be photographed and even comes up with her own suggestions for photographs. She and my friend’s nephew were wandering around the parking garage when my sister stopped under the light in the photograph and looked up at it. I thought it was a really lonely scene, but it needed something else. So I suggested that she play with a doll I had in my car, which added the element of playing that was needed.

The sensation of foreboding doesn't come as quickly in *Uproot*. The inspiration came from my memories playing in the woods around one of my homes. Many adults used to play in the woods as children, and have fond memories of doing so. When I was a child, I often pretended I was some sort of explorer or created forts out of branches.

However, this situation is not as innocent or safe. He is not in the woods that are in the background, but instead playing under a bridge. The bridge is covered in graffiti, which indicates that it is an urban location, commonly considered unsafe for kids to be in alone. Not only that, but homeless adults typically live under bridges in urban areas—also unsafe for children alone. The hill is covered in roots and rocks. Neither of these surfaces is entirely stable, so he could trip and fall down the hill at any moment.

Like *Park*, there is more to be discovered after initially establishing that the situation is perilous. Some of the same questions come up, including “What is he doing?” Again, the viewer can answer these questions by taking into account both the child's perspective and their own experiences. Perhaps he is building something. Maybe he is just being destructive. Either way, the child's actions are playful, but it is up to the viewer to determine how and why he is playing.



Unlike the location in *Park*, I had this location in mind for a while before photographing there. I was not sure what the children would do in the space, but I knew that it had all the elements I was looking for. There was the obvious element of danger because the ground's surface was so unstable. There were also implied perils such as the graffiti and underside of a bridge.

The boy in *Uproot* is my friend's nephew. I was not sure what he would do upon arriving, but if he was anything like my brother at his age, I had some idea.

That idea was not too far off. At first, he began throwing rocks at a different pillar, not pictured, and breaking them. This pillar was blank, though, and I knew I wanted to include the element of graffiti. So, I suggested moving uphill and he began to use a yellow rope that he found on the ground to tie various roots together and make a trap. I chose this photograph over similar ones because his actions mimic the white robot on the wall behind him.

Bibliography

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